

The Washington Post

Lyme Disease Cases Rising, Causing Alarm

Officials Are Focusing On Prevention, Treatment

By Amy Gardner
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, July 30, 2009

A surge in reported cases of Lyme disease in Northern Virginia has prompted action from local and federal officials.

Fairfax and [Loudoun](#) counties held community meetings this month to hear residents' concerns and share tips on treating and preventing transmission of the disease.

Last week, Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), who is chairman of the bipartisan House Lyme Disease Caucus, pushed the House Appropriations Committee to increase the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Lyme disease budget by more than \$3.6 million, to nearly \$9 million.

Jorge Arias, who leads Fairfax County's disease-carrying insect program, said the incidence of Lyme disease in the county has grown to about 200 cases a year. It's hard to know how much that figure has grown because surveillance has increased dramatically. There's no question that the disease is on the rise and that Lyme ticks are more prevalent, he said.

"The number of ticks is so much more than we've seen in the past," Arias said. "It could be the humidity; it could be the moisture; it could be some biological factor out there."

The good news is that there is much information on prevention and treatment. That was the subject of a meeting hosted last week by Fairfax supervisors representing areas with some of the worst infestations of ticks, Michael R. Frey (R-Sully) and Pat S. Herrity (R-Springfield).

"Lyme is a serious and devastating disease," Wolf said. "I am hopeful that through increased education and awareness efforts about the threat of Lyme disease, we can help to ensure people living in high-risk areas know how to protect themselves and their children from ticks."

Culling deer herds -- through managed hunts and overnight sharpshooting expeditions -- is a big part of local policy to deal with Lyme disease. The region's burgeoning deer population represents the highway system for the ticks that carry *Borrelia burgdorferi*, the bacteria that causes the disease. In some locations, deer number 400 per square mile, creating a serious public health issue.

Confirmed cases of Lyme disease -- which is characterized by such varied symptoms as a bull's-eye-shaped rash, fever and fatigue -- rose from three in 2004 to 82 in 2006, according to Fairfax County data. Much of the increase is attributed to better reporting of the disease, which is often quickly treated with antibiotics without being confirmed by blood tests. Still, officials say there is little doubt that case numbers are rising locally and nationally.

According to the CDC, reported cases rose from 19,800 in 2004 to 23,300 in 2005. Cases remain relatively low in Virginia -- 274 in 2005 compared with thousands in such Northeastern states as Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New York.

The increase in the Washington region is causing growing concern. Loudoun claims half of all reported cases in Virginia. In Maryland, Montgomery County's confirmed cases have grown fivefold since 2004, to 216.